

WARGAMES: WHEN HACKING WENT MAINSTREAM

Tuesday, September 20, 2011 - 11:40 AM

By [Alex Goldman](#) / [PJ Vogt](#)

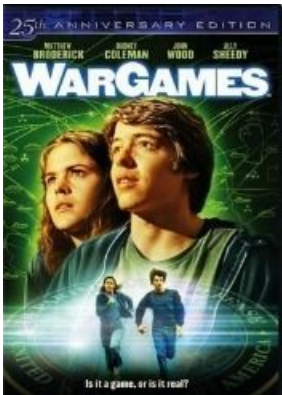
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(MGM/United Artists)

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WarGames trailer



However, when the film was pitched, no one really understood its premise. The script was rejected by numerous studios. According to the filmmakers, one basic problem was that no one knew what genre it fit into – the technology depicted in the movie (for instance, dial-up modems) was so new that studio representatives thought the movie only made sense as science fiction. In fact, the notion of hacking was so new to the world, that while the movie explores the concept, the word “hacker” is never uttered.

When the film was finally released it was a huge success, the 5th highest grossing movie of 1983

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(Number six, in case you were wondering, was *Octopussy*. Number four was *Trading Places*. *Return of the Jedi* was way out in front.) Of course, it wasn't just the movie that was popular – it was also its premise, which was something along the lines of "computers are a powerful and dangerous new tool that we barely understand." [The Times review](#) of the movie aptly summed it up: "[*WarGames*] perfectly realizes our worst suspicions about the susceptibility of computers, even very advanced ones, to tinkering by smart kids."

Those suspicions were legitimized a few months later, when some Milwaukee hackers who called themselves The 414s were busted by the FBI for hacking into the computers of the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, and Los Alamos National Laboratory. Even though they were hacking well before the movie came out, news reports like this one claimed they were emulating *WarGames*. Note that the concept is so new, the anchor doesn't even use the word "hacker," instead calling the 414s "computer raiders."



Hacking had existed well before both *WarGames* and the 414s, but the confluence of the movie and this real life incident of computer intrusion was too much for the media to resist. The 414s became a sensation, finding themselves all over the news, and even landing on the cover of [Newsweek magazine](#). The media reached for the most convenient pop culture comparison they had, and began to make breathless comparisons between the movie and the 414s.

In September, a few months after the arrests of the 414s, Congress began to hold hearings on the state of computer security, frequently invoking *WarGames* in their questioning. They went so far as to show a few minutes of the movie as a demonstration of security issues the country faced. It might bear reiterating here that *Wargames* was not a sober analysis of the phenomenon of computer hacking. This was a Hollywood film premised on the idea that NORAD's computer security was so porous that a teenage slacker could infiltrate it by accident and start a nuclear war.

"That movie had a significant effect on my treatment by the federal government," said hacker Kevin Mitnick in [an article for Wired](#). "I was held in solitary confinement for nearly a year because a prosecutor told a judge that if I got near a phone, I could dial up Norad and launch a nuclear missile."

Within months of the hearings, several new pieces of legislation were introduced specifically designed to outlaw this kind of hacking. By 1986, [The Computer Fraud and Abuse Act](#), specifically targeted at hacking, was signed into law.

While the hacker community at the time may've rolled their eyes a little at *WarGames*' unbelievable premise, that didn't stop them from borrowing jargon from the movie. In the film, one of the techniques the main character, David, uses to find a computer to connect to is a program that dials numbers in specific area codes in sequence until he finds a computer at the other end. After the movie, other hackers began to write programs that would do this very thing. They christened it "[war dialing](#)."

Many years later, with the advent of wi-fi, hackers also began to drive around their towns and cities and make and distribute maps of unprotected wireless networks they happened to locate (similar to what Google did a few years ago with the [Google Street View](#) cars.) In the spirit of *WarGames*, this practice was named "[war driving](#)."

WarGames was meant to be nothing more than an interesting diversion, a popcorn movie. It just so happened to be released at the exact moment when the American public (and America's lawmakers) was looking for answers: What was the hacker? What was hacking? It was this unlikely confluence of an exotic new phenomenon and a handy (if slightly silly) explanation that made a lasting impression, and allowed *Wargames* to define the media archetype of hackers.

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ALEX GOLDMAN

[Alex Goldman](#) is a producer for On the Media. One time he got run over by a car.



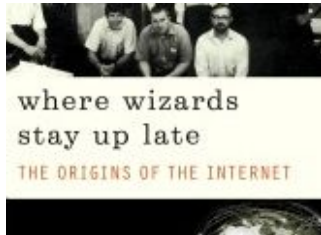
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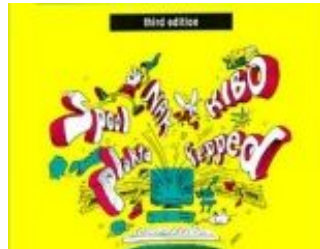
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Ross Freeman Levin from Portland, Oregon, Cascadia

The folks at the New York Times apparently don't listen to your show or fail to accept your hacker definition: Companies See Opportunity in Stopping Cellphone Hackers <http://nyti.ms/nUX4SN>

Sep. 28 2011 05:35 AM



Chris Mudgen from DeKalb, IL

I have been frustrated for years at the common misconceptions in the media about what hacking really is, so while I truly appreciated your piece about trying to better define the word hacker, especially Steven Levy's comments regarding the history of the MIT Model Railroad Club, I feel you may have missed an opportunity to examine the most literal etymology of the word 'Hacker' in it's origin at MIT.

As you noted it was originally an appellation given to computer science students (and probably staff) who had limited access to compute time on the mainframe there.

Because the earliest computer systems were time sharing systems, where your program had to share the resources

with other concurrent users, the prospect of making your programs smaller was attractive to people who had limited amounts of time for their program to run.

If you wanted to get the most bang-for-your-buck for your allotted compute-time, some of the most astute programmers of the time would realize (as in create or garner) extra value in their programming efforts by 'Hacking off' redundant individual instructions to make the program itself more compact, thereby requiring fewer compute cycles (or time) and making their programs effectively run faster (incurring less charges in compute time) or more efficiently (by processing more data in the same amount of allotted time).

Because of these early hackers' proficiency at analyzing machine language code for algorithmic efficiency required such a high level intimacy with the lowest possible levels of the machine's innermost workings, they were most often the first to spot flaws in code that would allow them to bypass security limitations within the systems. (you know, for fun!)

A sort of friendly competitive peer environment arose for being seen as the best at hacking off code, which, combined with the inclination toward pranking at MIT, made for an environment in which the community effectively improving the security and efficiency of its systems, while engaging in friendly intellectual competitiveness with their peers, you know, for fun... (or in more modern parlance, for the Luls).

Thanks

Sep. 25 2011 05:32 PM



Me

Tron

Sep. 20 2011 11:47 AM



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